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| <b>14. ABSTRACT</b><br>Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Julian Corbett are viewed in many circles as the fathers of sea power theory and maritime theory. They opportunely published their writings during the zenith of British power, which was built primarily upon the British Navy. As Mahan published his writings nearly 20 years earlier than Corbett, his writings began as the more popular and influential of the two. One could summarize Mahan's theory as the concentration of a nation's fleet in order to seek out and destroy the enemy fleet in a decisive naval battle. Corbett's theory, on the other hand, could be summarized as "either to secure the command of the sea or to prevent the enemy from securing it." (Corbett, 91) Corbett continues by specifying that, "command of the sea, therefore, means nothing but the control of maritime communications [or sea lines of communication (SLOCs)], whether for commercial or military purposes." (Corbett, 94) While their theories are by no means polar opposites, discussion continues to this day as to the best employment of a nation's navy. While Mahan's theory that winning naval battles might be the quickest path to achieving one's goal of command of the sea, as history shows, it is simply one method of achieving that objective. By examining Mahan's and Corbett's theories, the American Revolution, the Russo-Japanese War, and World War II, one can assert that the foremost purpose of sea power is in fact to secure the sea lines of communication, not winning naval battles. |  |  |                                       |                            |  |  |
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**Mahan and Corbett on Maritime Strategy**

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A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the Department of Strategy and Policy based on the following assigned topic:

**Question #1:** “The use of sea power is first and foremost predicated on securing the sea lines of communication, not winning naval battles.” Do you agree?

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

**Brian O'Lavin**  
//s//  
10 February 2009

Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Julian Corbett are viewed in many circles as the fathers of sea power theory and maritime theory. They opportunely published their writings during the zenith of British power, which was built primarily upon the British Navy. As Mahan published his writings nearly 20 years earlier than Corbett, his writings began as the more popular and influential of the two. One could summarize Mahan's theory as the concentration of a nation's fleet in order to seek out and destroy the enemy fleet in a decisive naval battle. Corbett's theory, on the other hand, could be summarized as "either to secure the command of the sea or to prevent the enemy from securing it." (Corbett, 91) Corbett continues by specifying that, "command of the sea, therefore, means nothing but the control of maritime communications [or sea lines of communication (SLOCs)], whether for commercial or military purposes." (Corbett, 94) While their theories are by no means polar opposites, discussion continues to this day as to the best employment of a nation's navy. While Mahan's theory that winning naval battles might be the quickest path to achieving one's goal of command of the sea, as history shows, it is simply one method of achieving that objective. By examining Mahan's and Corbett's theories, the American Revolution, the Russo-Japanese War, and World War II, one can assert that the foremost purpose of sea power is in fact to secure the sea lines of communication, not winning naval battles.

As a theorist, Mahan could be described as one-third romantic, one-third scientist, and one-third theorist. A fawning admiration of Great Britain's historical maritime dominance permeates throughout his writings and unfortunately somewhat diminishes his theory's credibility. As there is only one Great Britain with its unique seafaring people, government and geographic position, it is difficult to apply Mahan's philosophy to one's own nation, which is likely significantly different. As a naval officer, however, his profession gave him and his works

a certain amount of instant credibility when they were first published. His writings advocating powerful navies and decisive naval battles were certainly popular at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when all the major powers were engaged in a significant naval arms race. As will be discussed in greater detail later, Japan, which in many ways was similar to Great Britain, emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and appeared to vindicate Mahanian theory. However, the lessons learned by the Japanese in 1904-1905 and the Americans in World War II, should have indicated that Corbett's theory on the primacy of command of the sea over decisive naval battles was the more applicable of the two theories. For the purposes of this discussion, a decisive naval battle is not one that leads to war termination. Instead, it is one that results in at least a significant tactical victory by one side over the other. This is not to say that Mahan's research was wholly invalid. On the contrary, his criticisms of tactical and operational decisions made in the maritime domain throughout history are useful for all military planners as a subject of reflection. Nevertheless, Mahan's conclusions lacked the sort of timelessness which Corbett's possessed.

Sir Julian Corbett had the fortune of reflecting upon and building on Mahan's writings. Additionally, he transferred Clausewitz's concepts into the maritime domain. Corbett did not view the pursuit of decisive naval battles with the same sort of alacrity as Mahan. In fact, he stated quite clearly that the navy is generally a supporting effort to the army when he wrote that, "since men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided...either by what your army can do against your enemy's territory and national life, or else by the fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do." (Corbett, 16) Corbett's writings, quite rightly, center on the theory of the object, which is command of the sea. As military professionals, the object or objective drives everything. One can't plan or

measure results if the end state objective is unknown. As Corbett postulated, unlike command of the land where one can leave small garrisons behind, or where the control of the populace is a known, command of the sea is a nebulous misnomer. As he stated, “the normal position is that neither side has the command; that the normal position is not a commanded sea, but an uncommanded sea.” (Corbett, 91) As an uncommanded sea is the normal state of affairs, generally speaking, the seas are relatively free for everyone’s use in peacetime. It is only during times of war when belligerents attempt to deny civilian and/or military movement to one another. In most historical examples, however, the assets required to truly accomplish this are immense, and the effectiveness is always somewhat in doubt. Granted, geography and a cooperative adversary, like Japan in World War II, can simplify the effort. Nevertheless, even regional command of the sea is an expensive, difficult and time-consuming task. What Corbett’s theory takes into account is that, as always, the enemy has a vote. Unlike land warfare, it is generally much easier to avoid decisive engagement in the maritime domain. If one followed the Mahanian theory and searched nonstop for the decisive naval battle with an enemy that never left port, one risks wasting resources, needless wear and tear on vessels and vulnerability elsewhere. Many would argue that the United States Navy barely averted tactical disaster at Leyte Gulf specifically because it sought a decisive Mahanian naval battle. While it is clear that Mahan and Corbett are not polar opposites, Mahan’s decisive naval battles are simply ways to achieve the ends of Corbett’s command of the sea.

The American Revolution is of particular interest with respect to sea power theory as it serves to compare and contrast our two theorists. At the beginning of the war, the Americans did not possess any significant naval power. Thus, the strategy of the British Navy was rightly to use its maritime superiority to achieve a blockade of the colonies and provide freedom of action

to its land component in an attempt to outmaneuver the Continental Army. To this end, the British were very successful. The economy of New England was shattered, and had it not been for a significant amount of luck, the Continental Army would have been captured and annihilated while defending New York. When the balance of power shifted in 1778 to the allies, the British found themselves on the receiving end of superior naval forces. In this case, perhaps the best course of action for the British would have been concentration and a decisive naval battle in order to even the odds somewhat. It was precisely because the British could not be assured of secure SLOCs that they needed to adopt this different strategy. As it stood, the British found themselves generally outnumbered and fighting for local sea control in various theatres. With the French naval victory over the British at the Battle of the Virginia Capes, the French and Continental land forces turned victory at sea into victory on land by isolating and defeating Cornwallis's army. This example would fit perfectly with Corbett's mindset of coordinating land and sea operations to achieve decisive results on land.

Probably the most conspicuous example which supports Corbett's theory is the Battle of the Atlantic in World War II. In this case, the term "battle" is a misnomer that implies one continuous event. Rather, it was a maritime war within a war with victory going to the side that sunk the most ships the fastest. Here we see the near-disastrous effects of focusing almost exclusively on seeking naval battles while ignoring the importance of securing the SLOCs. When the U.S. entered the war in late 1941, it found itself generally unprepared to combat Germany's U-boats. Admiral Donitz launched a limited U-boat offensive off the East Coast of the United States which achieved results well beyond anything the Germans expected. The U.S. stood to profit from the years of British anti-submarine warfare (ASW) experience and specifically the hard-learned lesson that a lightly escorted convoy was better than no convoy at

all. Nevertheless, the U.S. Navy leadership initially ignored these lessons and determined that concentrating their forces in Mahanian hunter-killer groups and seeking out German submarines was the best use of their scarce resources. (McCranie, The Battle of the Atlantic) The proof of the leaders' failure to understand what their primary "Corbettian" objective should have been was in the results. This second German Navy "happy time" was a disastrous six months for U.S. coastal shipping and greatly strained U.S. / British relations. Fortunately the U.S. finally adapted and constructed an even better ASW architecture than the British. (Cohen and Gooch, 90) In short, by focusing on securing its SLOCs through a convoy system, the U.S. drastically reduced its shipping losses and turned the tide in favor of the allies in the Atlantic. Perhaps Corbett's key difference in comparison to Mahan was his realization that command of the sea was neither as easy nor as absolute as Mahan implied. In the reality of limited assets and vast ocean space, a nation can generally only maintain command of the sea locally and for a limited amount of time.

In many ways, the allies were fortunate with respect to German naval priorities. Admiral Raeder, as head of the German Navy, supported a large surface fleet buildup prior to the war, which left Donitz with few submarines at the war's outset. Allied code breaking notwithstanding, if the German Navy had focused on submarines instead of battleships, they might have begun the war with the numbers and technology required to eliminate Great Britain from the war, or drastically reduce the United States' ability to support the British and Soviets with material goods. Arguably, there were no decisive naval battles in the Atlantic in World War II. Victory came down to a war of attrition with control of the SLOCs and protection of shipping as the allied objectives.

In contrast, the United States' experience in the Pacific was almost the exact opposite of that in the Atlantic. Unlike the Germans, the Japanese were highly dependent on external

sources for their raw materials. Thus, their war machine was much more susceptible to attacks on their SLOCs and merchant fleets. Meanwhile, the Japanese submarine force failed to actively target United States merchant ships. This failure allowed the U.S. to concentrate its naval forces against the Japanese Fleet and destroy it in a series of large Mahanian naval battles. Ironically, however, it was the U.S. Navy's submarine warfare campaign against Japanese SLOCs that not only served to reduce Japan's industrial output, but also to limit the amount of resources its navy had in order to prosecute naval operations. The Japanese Navy's own failure to protect its SLOCs thus limited its own freedom of action and ability to seek a Mahanian decisive naval battle. By mid 1944, the resource problem was so dire that the Japanese Navy only had the resources for one major sortie. Fortunately, despite significant U.S. mistakes, the Japanese were defeated in this final battle.

While some historical examples exist in support of Corbett's theory on the primacy of controlling SLOCs, many would argue that the Russo-Japanese war vindicates Mahan's principle of the importance of the decisive naval battle. This argument has significant merit. First, the Japanese Navy focused on seeking a decisive naval battle from the outset. Had the Japanese succeeded in destroying the Russian Far East Fleet in the vicinity of Port Arthur early in the war, they would have simplified their operational and strategic situations. Second, the Japanese Navy's victory in the Tsushima Straits was a classic Mahanian battle of annihilation that turned out to be essentially the final act in a relatively quick, decisive victory. Russia's loss of these two fleets certainly contributed a sizable amount to the billion rubles the Russian government spent on the war up to that point, a sum which played no small role in Russia's decision to cut its losses and sue for peace. (Fuller, 401)

Upon closer inspection, however, the lessons from the case study point quite clearly to Corbett's insistence on controlling SLOCs. From the outset, the Japanese faced two principal difficulties in accomplishing their objective of capturing the Korean peninsula. First was the Russian Army in Manchuria and Korea. The second was the Russian Navy which threatened Japanese SLOCs, the security of which was necessary for deploying and maintaining the Japanese Army. Thus, Japan could feasibly be victorious on one medium and defeated on another and still not accomplish its objective. The Russians, on the other hand, essentially had a disposal force in their navy as they could lose it completely and still defeat the Japanese Army in Korea or Manchuria. As the war played out, the Russians refused to give decisive naval battle with their Far East Fleet. This fleet in being so threatened the Japanese that the end result was a protracted joint effort at great cost to the Japanese Army in dead and wounded in order to reduce the Far East Fleet and thus secure the Japanese SLOCs. Meanwhile, because the Japanese were so myopically focused on this decisive battle, the Russian naval forces from Vladivostok were able to take advantage of Japanese naval weakness elsewhere and sink troop and war materiel transports which were desperately needed on the mainland. Robbed of an early decisive naval victory at Port Arthur either because of lack of audacity or poor planning, the Japanese Navy should have focused its efforts on ensuring its transports arrived safely as opposed to the naval battle of attrition it faced while constantly blockading Port Arthur. This would have allowed for rest and refit of the vessels and crews, and allowed for a battle fought on Japan's timeline and chosen waterspace, like that which ended the war at Tsushima.

The Battle of Tsushima was another naval must-win situation for Japan as the Russian Fleet would have threatened the Japanese SLOCs which were necessary for its army's resupply. As its army was already at its culminating point of attack, with its supply lines stretched to the

limit, any disruption in Japanese supplies could have forced the Japanese to retreat out of Manchuria and surrender many of their gains. Fortunately for the Japanese, their decisive naval victory at Tsushima eliminated this last threat to their SLOCs.

Perhaps the final test is more theoretical and logic based than historical-proof based. From a military planner's perspective, it is very difficult to plan for a decisive naval battle as an objective. One can identify important points that, if threatened, might provoke an enemy's fleet to sortie. Whereas land forces can be enveloped, laid siege to, and eventually destroyed, only a close blockade might achieve the same objective at sea. Meanwhile, the blockading force would likely be subject to land defenses, as the Japanese discovered at Port Arthur. In contrast, focusing on controlling the SLOCs leads to a logical system of ways and means which can also take advantage of the enemy's movements to seek decisive naval battles. Even the famous War Plan Orange operated on the assumption that the Japanese would sortie and give battle at the time and place the U.S. chose. That is a significant assumption for such a critical event.

Control of the sea lines of communication or ensuring one's access to them played a significant role in nearly every war which had some sort of maritime component. Decisive naval battles, however, are relatively few and far between. This does not stand as a final proof, merely another piece of evidence that naval battles are a very important part of the greater whole, which is SLOC control. Military planners would do well to focus on what they can plan to accomplish, SLOC control, and treat naval battles as important contingency plans that may or may not result from their actions. This lesson is difficult to unlearn as most of one's naval career is spent training and preparing for the decisive naval battle. As the world's only superpower, the United States must continue to innovate and focus its efforts in order to quickly adapt to and defeat the

next threat to its SLOCs, which may be the next German U-boat style asymmetric threat, if it is to continue to maintain its superpower status.